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SUBJECT: MANDIC'S NEW PARTY SPLITS SERB POLITICAL SPECTRUM

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Andrija Mandic, the most prominent Serb political leader in Montenegro, has created a new party, New Serbian Democracy (known as NOVA), which aspires not only to unite all Serb organizations but also to attract non-Serb voters. Instead, amidst accusations that Mandic sold out his nationalist principles, NOVA has split Mandic's Serbian List alliance, and Mandic now has little time before the March 29 election to remake his image to appeal to the broader electorate. The jettisoning of radical Serb elements makes it easier for Mandic to work with the other major opposition parties and positions him to play a more constructive opposition role in the long term. However, in the near term it is not clear that NOVA will be able to garner the same level of support that Serbian List did in 2006. END SUMMARY.

All Serbs in One (Civic?) Party

¶2. (SBU) Rabble-rousing Serb nationalist Andrija Mandic surprised many observers in December when he announced that he would seek to unify all Serb organizations into a single party, which, he said, would appeal to non-Serbs as well as Serbs. At the time, Mandic also said he opposed treating Serbs as a minority - rather, Serbs were a constituent people of Montenegro - and proposed dropping the word "Serb" from the name of the new party (he eventually backed down). In a radical shift for such a fierce opponent of Montenegrin statehood, he also said the new party would "respect" Montenegrin independence and hinted that he could cooperate with Movement for Change (PzP) leader Nebojsa Medojevic, vilified by many Serbs for supporting the new Constitution (which some Serbs believe demeans their identity).

¶3. (U) Mandic's new party, New Serbian Democracy (known as NOVA), held its founding congress on January 24. (Note: Until the congress, Mandic had headed the Serbian List (SL) alliance, which consisted of Mandic's previous party, the Socialist People's Party (SNS), and the smaller Party of Democratic Unity (SDJ), the People's Socialist Party (NSS), the Serb Radical Party (SSR), and two NGOs.)

Expanding the Base

14. (SBU) Mandic told us on the eve of NOVA's congress that his presidential run - during which, in a preview of his current initiative, he downplaying Serb identity issues (reftel) - had shown that his support was limited to the roughly one-third of the population who identify themselves as Serbs. In order to compete with the ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), he needed to create a new vehicle that could appeal to Montenegrins and others as well as Serbs. NOVA would accept the fact that Montenegro was an independent state (despite irregularities in the referendum) and focus on issues broader than those related to Serb identity. "We will reject those (in his former party and bloc) who cannot deal with this," he told us, "and move forward. We hope to pick up more voters than we lose." On February 18 he reiterated this point, telling us that quality of life and economic issues would be the focus of NOVA's election message.

New Project Splits Serbs

15. (SBU) Mandic's initiative caused an uproar within the Serbian List. In December, Dusko Sekulic, leader of the Serb Radical Party, and Momcilo Vuksanovic, a Serbian List MP who had just formed the Serb National Council (an umbrella organization for Serbs created under the auspices of the Law on Minorities) accused Mandic of creating a "pro-American puppet party, which is siding with the PzP..." They formed a separate parliamentary caucus, the "Serbian National Club," and a coalition, the "Serbian National List," to compete in the election. SDJ leader Zoran Zizic also told us he would not fold his party into NOVA unless all other Serbian List members did so. (In the end, from

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the SL, only the NSS joined NOVA.)

16. (SBU) Mandic also encountered difficulties in recruiting other (non-SL) Serb parties to NOVA. Democratic Serbian People's Party (DSS) leader Ranko Kadic told us recently that negotiations broke down when Mandic declined to take a firm stance on reunification with Serbia (which DSS supports) and (according to Kadic) refused to categorically rule out cooperation with the GoM.

17. (SBU) Finally, Mandic also encountered opposition within his own (former) party, the SNS. His proposal to eliminate the word "Serb" from the title of the new party was particularly unpopular, but former SNS Executive Board director Gojko Raicevic also recently told us that his (Raicevic's) reservations dated from Mandic's presidential run - which Raicevic said did not pay enough attention to Serb rights. Raicevic said the final straw was Mandic's refusal to support the Serb National Council. "I have stayed true to the (SNS's) platform," Raicevic told us, "Mandic who has not." Raicevic, SNS Deputy Head Novak Radulovic (who joined the Serbian National List), SNS spokesman Dobrilo Dedejic (who formed a new party, the Serbian People's Party) and several other prominent SNS leaders all declined to participate in NOVA.

Comment

18. (SBU) Mandic, who is much more pragmatic and opportunistic than his reputation and public statements might indicate, appears to have calculated that NOVA can expand his electorate in the long run. Many also contend that Mandic is taking his cues from the split in the Serb Radical Party in Belgrade (while others believe is simply attempting to impose order on his often fractious Serb List partners).

19. (SBU) In the short term, however, it is not clear that NOVA helps Mandic's electoral prospects. The electorate knows Mandic as a Serb nationalist, and he has little time before March 29 to rebrand himself as a more inclusive political leader. In addition, his about-face on Montenegrin independence and the controversy over the name of the new party are likely to disorient some supporters. Finally, Mandic's initiative acrimoniously split the Serbian List, creating several new organizations which will compete against him in the election. Mandic has increased the prospects for a future opposition alliance with the PzP and Socialist People's Party (SNP) by jettisoning radical elements in his party and bloc. But it remains to be seen whether NOVA can match the Serbian List's vote totals (14.4 percent) from the last election (in September 2006).
KONTOS